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SUBJECT: FIRST INTERNATIONAL ARAL SEA 2009 CONFERENCE

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¶1. SUMMARY: The Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg hosted the First International 2009 Aral Sea Conference on October 11-15, with the participation of leading scientists from Russia, Central Asia, Europe, Israel, and the United States. Zoological Institute Director Pugachev said the current desiccation appears to be a natural process that has been accelerated by intense irrigation. Revival of the Aral Sea is highly unlikely without regional agreements on the social, economic, and political problems in the region. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, Karlikhanov, predicted the eastern portion of the large (southern) Aral Sea will completely disappear in 2010. Less than 10% of river waters eventually flow into the Aral Sea. If the existing "non-rational" use of water continues, Central Asia will face a severe water deficit beginning in 2020. Restoration of the northern Aral Sea is the only positive development. Eurasian Development Bank Sarsembekov said the Aral Sea is an ecological catastrophe, and Central Asia now faces the resulting political consequences. Competition for water resources will increase, and the Aral Sea's future depends on development of a joint resource management program. Western Michigan University Professor and renowned Aral Sea expert Micklin said increasing irrigation far beyond the "level of sustainability" primarily caused the Aral Sea's modern recession, the most serious in the past several thousand years. It is extremely unlikely that the Aral Sea will ever return to its size in ¶1960. The partial restoration of the northern Aral Sea is a success, but it needs to be continued before one can say it has been fully restored. It is theoretically possible to restore the western Aral Sea, but much more study and investigation is needed to determine its worth. Zoological Institute and noted Aral Sea expert Aladin said the Ministry of Water Resources of the Soviet Union "killed" the Aral Sea. The Conference issued the St. Petersburg "Declaration on The Aral Sea," summarized in the cable. END SUMMARY.

REGIONAL AGREEMENTS NEEDED, BUT TIME IS SHORT

¶2. The Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg hosted the First International 2009 Aral Sea Conference on October 11-15, with the participation of leading scientists from Russia, Central Asia, Europe, Israel, and the United States. Zoological Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences Director Oleg Pugachev opened the

Conference with a general overview of the Aral Sea's past recessions and revivals. He said the current desiccation appears to be a natural process accelerated by intense irrigation. (NOTE: The common word for agricultural activity throughout the conference was "irrigation," which this drafter will subsequently use. END NOTE.) He believed the Aral Sea could revive again if one only considered purely natural factors. However, this return is highly unlikely without regional agreements on the social, economic, and political problems in the region. Unfortunately, it will be almost impossible to reach such agreements, or the process will be too slow, to permit the eventual restoration of the Aral Sea to its pre-1960 level.

SEVERE WATER DEFICIT IN 2020

13. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea Executive Committee Member Torekhan Karlikhanov said the Aral Sea has rapidly desiccated in the past 40 years. If this trend continues, the eastern portion of the large (southern) Aral Sea, which is already almost gone, will completely disappear in 2010. He added that an incomplete water resource management system, environmental pollution and loss of biodiversity, the absence of a regional program to adopt measures to ameliorate climate change, the inability to address and "solve" various social problems such as outward migration and unemployment, the lack of adequate drinking water and sanitation, and high salinity in the dust that hangs over the region affect the Aral Sea. Karlikhanov said 91% of all water from the Amur- and Syr-Darya rivers is used for various purposes, such as irrigation, urban use, and hydro-electric power generation, and less than 10% of the river waters eventually flow into the Aral Sea. Overall, agricultural productivity per cubic meter volume of water used is decreasing due to the "non-rational" use of water. If this continues, he warned, Central Asia will face a severe water deficit beginning in 2020, as per capita water resources decline. Central

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Asia's biggest problem currently is coordination of energy generation in the winter and water release for irrigation in the spring and summer.

NORTH ARAL SEA RESTORATION IS THE SINGLE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

14. Karimhanov said that Kazakhstan, with World Bank assistance, undertook to restore the northern Aral Sea, and completed the first stage of the project in 2005. A 13 kilometer long dam that separates the small (northern) Aral Sea from the large (southern) Aral Sea resulted. The water level then increased from 30 meters above sea level to 42 meters, and the sea, once more than 100 kilometers away from the former port city of Aralsk, is now only 23 kilometers away. The second phase, not yet implemented, will raise the water level higher and let the sea return to its original banks. Fish stocks are thriving and fishermen are now returning to work.

THE ARAL SEA IS AN ECOLOGICAL CATASTROPHE

15. Eurasian Development Bank Representative Tulegen Sarsembekov said there are now more than one million cubic kilometers of desert in Central Asia, and although only 5% of the land is considered "oasis"-like, it contains most of the heavily populated zones. The Aral Sea, once the world's fourth largest inland body of water, has been steadily shrinking since the 1960s. During the Soviet era, the government planned to divert water from Russia to Central Asia, but Gorbachev "killed" this plan in 1986. Sarsembekov said arable lands have increased dramatically, and population centers have grown considerably in the region, including industry. As a result, the existing water cannot adequately supply the needs. (NOTE: One participant interrupted and insisted that the problem is not an increase in population but poor agriculture planning and an increase in irrigation and power generation. END NOTE.) According to Sarsembekov, the Aral Sea is an ecological catastrophe, of which Central Asia now faces the political consequences. Competition for water resources will increase, in part due to the failure to regard the Aral Sea zone as a complete zone, and in part due to the fact that countries have tended to solve their problems independently. He said the future of the Aral Sea depends on the ability of all countries in the region to develop a joint resource management program that gives adequate water resources to all. A charter of

cooperative partnership must be drafted so that all benefit from resources.

CURRENT DESICCATION WORST IN SEVERAL THOUSAND YEARS

16. Western Michigan University Professor and renowned Aral Sea expert Philip Micklin rhetorically asked whether the Aral Sea has a future. He noted that the Aral Sea had desiccated and refilled several times during the past 10,000 years, with the changing course of the Amu- and Syr-Darya rivers as the major cause. However, since the 1960s, the water level has dropped primarily due to an increase in water use for irrigation far beyond the "level of sustainability." Micklin said the modern recession of the Aral Sea is the most serious in the past several thousand years. If it continues at its current pace, it will be the worst in the past ten million years. It is extremely unlikely that the Aral Sea will ever return to its 1960 size. He noted the success of the partial restoration of the northern Aral Sea, but it must continue before one can call it fully restored. The partial restoration of the north Aral Sea cost at least \$84 million, but the investment appears worthwhile. While scientists should continue to investigate the northern Aral Sea's partial restoration, he said, preservation of the eastern Aral Sea appears hopeless, because it has practically disappeared.

17. According to Micklin, it is very important to preserve the remainder of the Amu- and Syr-Darya river delta systems, their ecosystem, and biodiversity. Donors should also invest in programs to increase the health and welfare of the region's residents. He called restoration of the Aral Sea in the near future difficult due to the enormous amount of water and huge decrease in irrigation required, which is highly unlikely. Up to now, climate change has not been a major factor in the Aral Sea's desiccation, but it will

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certainly become more of one in the future. Micklin asserted that restoration of the western Aral Sea is theoretically possible, but would need much more study and investigation to determine its worth. Siberian river diversion is a very doubtful solution, he said, because of its high cost and complication. Plus, strong opposition to this idea exists inside Russia, and international support from donors is lacking.

ARAL SEA IS DEAD DUE TO SOVIET-ERA IRRIGATION POLICIES

18. Russian Academy of Sciences Zoological Institute Professor, noted Aral Sea expert, and Conference-organizer Nikolay Aladin said that, in spite of its high level of salinity, all the Aral Sea zones are still "alive" with fish species, invertebrates, and flora, but their ecosystem differs from before. Many of the introduced species carried infections and parasites, and some devoured all the plankton, with a negative impact on the existing environment. "Who killed the Aral Sea?" Aladin asked several times during the conference. "I'll tell you who killed the Aral Sea. It was the Ministry of Water Resources of the Soviet Union!" He said that, even considering natural changes, the Aral Sea would not have disappeared if not for the extreme impact of the current system of irrigation created during the Soviet era. One can now say, he stressed, that the Aral Sea as a geological object disappeared 20 years ago. "The Aral Sea is dead! Long live the Aral Sea!" In effect, two Aral Seas exist, small and large. Fishing is now restricted to the northern Aral Sea, because the western Aral Sea is too salty. In 2010, the eastern Aral Sea, now almost dried up, will completely disappear, and only the western Aral Sea and Tshchebas Bay will remain.

ARAL SEA CONFERENCE DECLARATION

19. The Conference issued a St. Petersburg "Declaration on The Aral Sea," noting that the Aral Sea has undergone unprecedented shrinking and salinization since the 1960s, which negatively impacts the sea and nearby inhabitants. The Aral Sea's current desiccation results primarily from the expansion of irrigation in the sea's drainage basin during the Soviet era that exceeded sustainability, which led to a marked decline of river inflow to the sea. Global warming, while real, has not majorly caused the Aral's desiccation since the

1960s, but its importance will increase in the future.

¶10. The Conference Declaration states that diversion (e.g. redirection) of Siberian rivers southward to the Aral Sea Basin or pumping water from the Caspian to the Aral cannot realistically solve water problems in Central Asia because of their expensiveness, complication, requirement of complex international agreements, and serious potential environmental consequences. It recommends instead a focus on local and regional solutions to these key issues, such as improved efficiency of water use in irrigation and efforts to preserve and partially restore remaining parts of the Aral Sea.

¶11. The Conference Declaration optimistically states that "reports of the Aral Sea's death are premature." The Small (north) Aral Sea has been partially restored. Although the Eastern Basin of the Large Aral is lost, the Western Basin can be preserved, as can major parts of the Syr and Amu Dar'ya deltas. The Aral Sea of the 1960s is gone, but preservation of a much smaller Aral Sea consisting of two sizable lakes that have ecological and economic value remains feasible. Furthermore, in the more distant future, substantially increased inflow to the sea and restoration of the Aral close to its former size may be possible. Such developments happened in the past and could be possible again. (COMMENT: This optimistic note was a point of contention at the conference. The declaration is a graceful compromise between the skeptics of the Aral Sea's return and those who want to downplay the human factor and the threat that the current global warming trend poses to the region. This observer would caution not to put too much hope on the likelihood of its return. END COMMENT.)

¶12. The Declaration concludes that future study of the Aral Sea and its surrounding region should be a balance of theoretical and applied science and involve scientists from different disciplines

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and countries. Special efforts should be made to attract and engage younger-generation scientists and researchers to Aral Sea problems in order to secure long-term, scientific commitment and continued international dialogue. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea should co-operate with leading scientists all over the World, including Russia (NOTE: This last phrase required some negotiation. END NOTE).

¶13. COMMENT: While some of the scientific community's opinions diverged, the majority concluded that the current desiccation of the Aral Sea is a man-made disaster caused by the Soviet Union's intensification of "irrigation" (e.g., cotton production in Uzbekistan) in the early 1960s. Kazakhstan's effort to restore the Northern Aral Sea was the only positive note in the conference, but the consensus is that this renewal cannot serve as a model to revive either the western or eastern Aral Seas. In addition, climate change may affect the future viability of the Aral Sea (including the restored north Aral Sea) if the Amur-Darya and Syr-Darya rivers begin to lose water because of receding glaciers. Additional hydroelectric projects may also further reduce water flow, eventually threatening even the Northern Aral Sea. Nevertheless, while donor agencies (including the U.S. government) may still find opportunities to fund various cooperative scientific and humanitarian projects, reviving the Aral Sea is not likely to be among them. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND